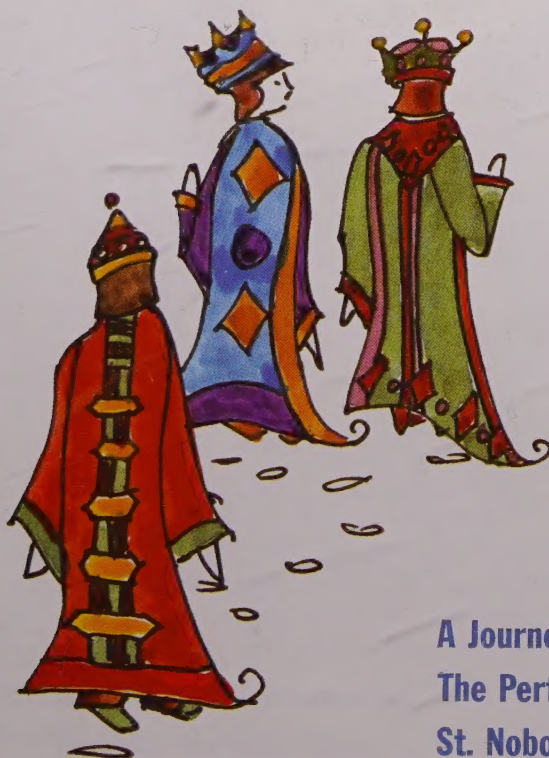
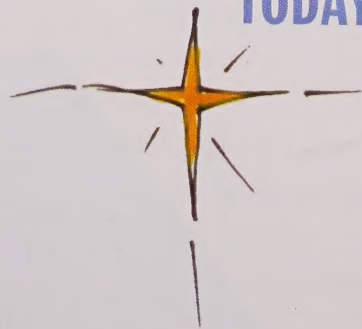


# LutheranWoman

December 2008

TODAY



A Journey: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany  
The Perfect Holiday  
St. Nobody  
Susie Says, Fear Not!



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## TRUE IDENTITY

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2008

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VOICES

## True Identity

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

**Have you ever been** mistaken for someone else? When I was in college, I had a roommate, Donna, who looked a lot like me. Or she would say I looked a lot like her. We were the same height, had the same hair style and color, and we both wore glasses. Often people (especially professors) would mistake one of us for the other. We used this to our advantage once in phys ed, when I wasn't feeling well and she went to class in my stead. It worked—the professor didn't realize it wasn't me. Though when I went to class the next week, he commented that I had improved considerably since the previous class (Donna was even less athletic than me).

In this session of the Bible study, we meet Daniel and the three young men who serve in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. As Jews living in a foreign country, they face the questions of how to practice their faith and maintain their identity as people of God. The writers ask, "People wondered how much to adapt or adjust to another nation's values and customs. Was there a danger of being absorbed into the larger culture and losing their identity?"

We struggle with the same questions. Maggie Rourk reminds us in "St. Nobody" that although the world will assign us an identity, "... we can place on ourselves the identity label that our Savior has ready made for us: Child of God. And on that label is also imprinted *Saint and I am, and I am also becoming.*"

At this time of year, we may find the expectations of our culture and the

promises of our faith at odds—we need to remember our true identity as people grounded in Jesus Christ. As Catherine Malotky writes in "The Perfect Holiday," we have two holidays happening at once—the commercial and the religious. She asks, "How do we care for ourselves and those we love in the midst of the cultural celebration and still be open in faith to the deep truth of this season—that God comes to you and to me freely, as a gift of deepest love . . . ?"

Two other articles in this issue help us think about how to meet the challenge of honoring Christ's birth while recognizing the reality of the consumer culture around us.

Susan Greeley writes about the journey through the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. She encourages us to "look at the whole church year, and celebrate these first three seasons as if they were three verses of the same song. It's a beautiful tune sung in many different ways around the world."

Sue Edison-Swift offers a reflection on gift giving: "After 30-some years of Christmas gift giving, I guess I have figured out a few things. Since I'm an impulse buyer, I give up malls and mega-stores for Advent. . . . I've stopped worrying about parity or even consistency. Some years there are folks in our lives who just need a little Christmas more than others."

As you and your family journey through these holy seasons, we wish you blessings and peace and joy. 🌿

**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at [LWT@elca.org](mailto:LWT@elca.org).





GIVE US THIS DAY

## God's Child, God's House

by Marj Leegard

### Did you ever call an

expert for help with a balky piece of equipment and hear the expert imperiously ask, "Have you read the instruction book?" He knows that instruction books were made for filling up filing cabinets. Instructions are for those who already know. They are like sewing patterns, fully understandable after you have taken the seam out three times.

How can we be expected to know all the ins and outs of human relationships? Of course, we think we know more than our own mothers and certainly more than our mothers-in-law.

Hardly anyone else gives us advice, and we wake in the night with questions. And our babies wake with little red faces from all the effort of crying and trying to tell us what is bothering them.

When the questions grow more serious, we often turn to God with inquiries about our children and grandchildren and godchildren. We come pleading for clear answers. Asking for help with health problems. We want to see the pathway we should take, and find direction signs at every crook in the road. God patiently asks, "Did you read the instruction book?" and then, "Did you look to the lives of others who have walked the path before you?"

And you want to explain, "This child came with problems I did not anticipate."

"This child takes more time than I have to give."

We are bleary-eyed from lack of sleep, first from a baby's late-night cry and then from worry over a teenager not

home yet. Lack of sleep from going over that well-worn litany of things we worry about in the dark of the night.

And it isn't enough that I am responsible for this one child, but what about all the hungry babies in the world that are on my heart, too?

And where are the people who have walked the way before me, the people who are also my instruction books? I look beside me in the pews. They walk with me in the church yard. They sing with my babies at the Christmas program. They not only have read the instruction book, but they live by it.

Whose children are these? God tells us over and over. "These are my children. They are mine forever and always. *My* children. Yours to care for, for my sake."

We need to be reminded, and that is what the people do. They remind us in their singing and in our conversations.

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Children of the king!

We were eating dinner in the church basement while some of the children were making use of this freedom by racing up and down the aisles. One elderly lady grabbed the nearest little boy, who happened to be the pastor's son. She scolded him just a little and he turned to her and said, "This is my dad's church!"

There would be future adjustments to this declaration, but he was right. He was God's child in God's house. 🌿

**Marj Leegard** and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.





# SAINT NOBODY

by Marguerite M. Rourke

Matthew learned two tough lessons about his identity in the space of just a few years.

First, at age five, he found out that our home congregation, St. Matthew's in Charleston, South Carolina, was not named for him, but the real situation was actually the other way around; he was not amused. Second, at age 10, he learned that his brother's birthday, August 24, was the feast day of St. Bartholomew, Apostle and Martyr, a fairly big deal as saints go, with churches named after him and everything. But, lo, who appeared on Matthew's

birthday, November 13, in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* calendar of festivals and commemorations? Not a soul. He was frosted. "That's not fair!" declared our younger son. "I was born on St. Nobody's Day!"

Well, let all the people say "Amen!" To quote the good Dr. Luther: This is most certainly true. Regardless of who is commemorated on our birthday (all chance, of course), every one of us is St. Nobody. Fret not; that is perfectly fine, because St. Nobody is exactly who each of us is called to be. We are the saints: the called out,



set-apart, following-Christ people. In our baptism we are called to minister among and to serve all, to labor for the kingdom, and to go about the business of daily living in a saintly way, with our names known only to those few who live around us and to the God who lives for us.

## SET APART

As today's youth say, this is *huge*. Our identity is everything to us, and St. Nobody is it. Remember that *saint*, from the Latin for *holy*, does not mean pure or sinless. *Holy* means *set apart*, utterly different, entirely other. Each of us is holy, a saint, set apart for discipleship and service, marked, sealed, named, and claimed in the only identity we have that's good in this world and the next: Child of God.

Certainly each of us has our own name, and that is important. I still remember my eyes pouring forth more water than the font contained as each of our sons was named and washed into new life in Holy Baptism: David Edwin, child of God; Daniel Matthew, child of God.

In baptism each of our sons was claimed by the Lord Jesus Christ as a member of his church, a sheep of his own fold, a lamb of his own redeeming, and a tiny, crying, squirming worker in the kingdom of God. They were only eight and six weeks old. They have no memory of their baptismal day,

but Jesus remembers, and he knows exactly who they are.

Even as secure in their identity as they were, our sons learned the same identity lessons that the world teaches all of us: The world rarely, if ever, asks who we are. No, the world's way is to tell us who we are or ought to be or could be or can't be, all hawked at us through more ways and voices than heads of pins have dancing angels. Therefore, we, the baptized, must answer the world with "Hah! As if!"

The world forgets much better than it remembers, and what the world most often forgets is Who made it and just Who is in charge of whom and what. The world never remembers those first four awesome words: *In the beginning, God . . .* but we do.

## OUR IDENTITY

In our baptism each of us is a precious treasure, a son, a daughter, a believer, a saint. Granted, "Child of God" and "Saint" are not things that appear on a résumé. God has named each of us Child of God and Saint not just for *being*, but also for *doing*. That's the tricky part about Christian identity: It has baggage. Children of God and saints not only *are*, but they *do*, because this is who God made us to be and what God calls us to do in our baptism. The baggage of our Christian identity, therefore, is that we must keep

on keeping on being and doing, secure in the knowledge that God will provide for our every need to accomplish the tasks set before us.

Even amid the world's shortcomings and difficulties, we remember and rejoice that this is the world that God so loves. Despite the world's idea of evidence to the contrary, in great love God decided to make us and put us in this world, endow us with the capacity to make choices, and love us right on into eternal life.

Our identity problem is not so much with the world not knowing or forgetting who we are. Our identity problem is not even that the world assumes it can re-name us or tell us who we are. The problem, to quote that worthy Walt Kelly comic Pogo, is that "We have met the enemy and he is us." *We* forget who and whose we are. That's called sin. We are God's and we belong to God lock, stock, barrel, blood, and bone. Nothing can change that. Ever.

Don't kid yourself: The world will assign each of us an identity. Take your pick of one or any combination hereof: inadequate, faulty, incompetent, insignificant, disposable, superior, capable, better, inferior, worse, inept, worthy, unworthy, superfluous, and so on *ad infinitum*. But like one of those annoying "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_" sticky tags, the world's label is not permanently affixed to



us. We can snatch that trashy thing right off and pitch it in the garbage can where it belongs. At that very instant, dear friends, we can place on ourselves the identity label that our Savior has ready made for us: Child of God. And on that label is also imprinted *Saint* and *I am*, and *I am also becoming*.

## NAME TAGS

God must set great store by our rightful identity name tags because God's word contains so many of them. The best part is that we are all of these things.

This list is nowhere near complete but it will suffice to show the world what being a Christian encompasses: saint, conqueror, light of the world, salt of the earth, chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, baptized, God's own people, servant of Christ, steward of God's mysteries, the body of Christ, hearer and doer of the word, rooted in Christ, living stones, spiritual house, temple, fellowship, forgiven, community, reconciled, evangelist, disciple, and so on, unto eternity.

No Child of God lives exclusively in the astounding beauty of this world, and no Child of God is exempt from its chaos. Saints live amid glorious highs, witnessing miracles and knowing the ecstasy of faith. Saints also live the terrible lows of seeing evil and injustice triumph in some times and circum-

stances. Saints will always know the pain of suffering and rejection simply because we claim the name Child of God.

The world can take away our name; witness what happened to Daniel and his three friends (Daniel 1). Babylon had invaded and conquered Judah, and part of King Nebuchadnezzar's plan to eradicate every vestige of Jewish identity was to change the names of prominent persons. That name change, that effort to make them forget who they were, did not seem to bother that foursome at all. They knew who they were: children of the Most High God. Even though enslaved, even though sentenced to execution of a particularly horrific nature (Daniel more than once), those four kept holy ways and lived according to holy commandments.

## CHILD OF GOD

We have identity as Children of God and we live in that identity as saints who believe and do. Our identity means something, or else we wouldn't have it. God has better things to do than think up meaningless trivia with which to clutter our lives. We have our identity as Children of God, and we live in that identity as saints who believe and act, as saints who have faith and do.

How are others to know our identity? How do others know they

encounter a Child of God? The only way others know our true identity is by how we identify ourselves: as Child of God doing justice and bringing about Christ's peace, speaking and acting as Jesus would, loving mercy and valuing all God's children, risking everything to seek the kingdom, and enjoying the perfect freedom of proclaiming the gospel.

A Child of God steps out in faith, trusting only in the God who identifies with us and who is the same God who loved us all the way to the cross, carries us all the way through the tomb, and places us right where our identity says we belong: in the Father's house of many rooms.

Wherever we are and whatever we are doing, we will end this day as saints who do not yet from our labors rest. But that is also our identity; thus, all is as it should be.

Each night let all of us Saints Nobody ask God to grant us rest to strengthen us for celebrating our feast day every day. Let each St. Nobody give thanks that every new morning we arise, full of grace, ready and eager to wear our Lord's very own I.D. tag: *Child of God*. 🌿

**The Rev. Dr. Marguerite M. Rourk**, pastor of **Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fairfax, Va.**, shares her life with husband David, sons Edwin of Portland, Ore., and Matthew of Asheville, N.C., two cats, and two ferrets. **As ever, the ferrets are in charge.**



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HEALTH WISE

## The Power of Prayer

by Molly M. Ginty

### Lyn Thompson felt

that God was her best hope.

At age 39, Thompson was widowed and raising her four daughters alone when she was diagnosed with stage III breast cancer, which has a 50 percent survival rate. How could she afford treatment on the salary she earned as a teacher? How could she endure a double mastectomy and chemotherapy while struggling to support her young family?

So Thompson prayed.

"God's answers came in response," says Thompson. "When I had only \$2,000 left, I prayed for financial help and received \$1,000 in the mail anonymously and another \$1,000 as a gift from a student's family. When cancer left me feeling beaten down, I rested in my faith and listened to God's voice, which assured me I would survive."

Two decades later, Thompson is cancer free and working as a spiritual outreach coordinator at Tulsa's Cancer Treatment Center, one of a growing number of health care facilities that are relying on prayer and faith to help speed their patients' recovery.

In Jeremiah 30:17, God says, "I will restore health to you." And in recent years, new research has backed up this pledge. Studies show that prayer can ease mental illness, improve patients' quality of life, and help them cope more effectively with illness. Surveys show that most patients rely on prayer, and 80 percent feel better after "spiritual healing."

From Lazarus to the lepers, the Bible abounds with stories of healing. And

from the pilgrims who flock to Lourdes, France, to the Christian Scientists who say that God heals them without medicine, the modern-day world abounds with such stories, too.

In Anchorage, Alaska, a 43-year-old woman with stage III lung cancer read her Bible daily and was cured despite having just a 7 percent chance of survival. In Sanford, North Carolina, a 16-year-old girl with severe anorexia heard God speak to her in her room one evening—and felt her obsession with weight disappear. In Wilmington, Delaware, a 55-year-old social worker lost seven family members over the course of two years, developing depression and bleeding ulcers as she grieved these deaths. When she began to pray regularly, both her physical and mental ailments eased.

Just as in these stories, a growing body of research links spirituality to health and healing.

In 1997, an *American Journal of Public Health* study found that subjects who attended religious services regularly lived an average 10 years longer than those who did not. In 2005, *Lancet* research showed that heart surgery patients had 50 to 100 percent fewer health complications if others prayed for them.

In 2004, a *New Scientist* study showed that women who had difficulty conceiving were twice as likely to get pregnant if people prayed for them. And last year, research in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* showed that hospital patients who pray and attend worship

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) for more information.



regularly recover from post-operative depression 50 percent faster than those who are not as religious.

Analysis done by Mayo Clinic researchers reveals that 75 percent of studies on spirituality and health show a positive correlation.

That's why more and more doctors are incorporating spirituality into medical practice. At the University of Alabama School of Medicine, professor Cheryl L. Holt uses Bible passages to reach out to local church members and encourage them to get health screenings. At Duke University Medical Center, psychiatrist Harold G. Koenig takes note of his patients' spiritual history in the same way he examines their medical charts. And at three-quarters of United States medical schools (including Harvard, Stanford, and UCLA), future physicians can take classes that explore the link between spirituality and health.

In the future, will doctors dispense prescriptions for prayer? Will hospitals use religious services and Scripture to help people with heart disease lower their cholesterol levels and help hospice patients feel less pain and more peace?

Experts predict that since research on prayer's efficacy is mixed, since modern medicine is scientific and secular—and since it's impossible to measure God in a lab—spiritual practices will largely continue to be left to the patient.

Even so, health advocates are encouraging patients to turn to their faith communities—and their faith—when they face medical challenges.



"At times of health crises, we can be 'emptied' enough to experience God's presence," says Sue Edison-Swift of Park Ridge, Illinois, who prayed fervently during a cancer scare that her daughter survived. "Most times we are so full of ourselves that we believe we can think, act, pray, cajole, or otherwise work our way into health. The gift of being emptied means we realize that it's not us, but God, who acts."

For many patients, that "emptiness" or grace can itself be a form of healing.

"Though studies have yet to prove that prayer can improve physical health, prayer can nevertheless offer patients courage and guidance," says Anne Harrington, chair of scientific history at Harvard University and author of *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine*. "By drawing on the resource of spirituality, they can better cope with any illness—or any difficulty—that they may have to face." 🌸

**Molly M. Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

**For more information:**

The ELCA Web site has a prayer center.

Go to [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org). Click on "What we believe" then "Prayer center."





## CALENDAR NOTES

# December

*compiled by Audrey Novak Riley  
from sources including Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays  
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book  
of Worship (LBW), published by  
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers  
([www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org))*

This month sees the beginning of not only a new liturgical season, Advent, but also a new liturgical year, the year of Mark. Scholars generally agree that Mark's Gospel was written down not long after the year 70, which makes it the earliest of the four canonical Gospels.

What was happening in the lives of Christians around that time? The leader of Jerusalem's Christians, James, had been stoned to death in the year 62, when the absence of the Roman governor gave the corrupt Temple leadership a chance to have him killed. Tradition has it that James' congregation fled Jerusalem for the town of Pella, in the Decapolis across the Jordan River, when things started to get really ugly in 66.

In 66, long-simmering resentments among Jewish factions, suspicions between Jews and Greek-speakers, and their common bitterness toward the occupying Roman power finally boiled over. That led to a vicious civil war that was finally put down by the brutal Roman siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in August of the year 70.

Things were no quieter for Christians in Rome, where many scholars suggest Mark's Gospel was written. The emperor Nero blamed Christians for the great fire of 64, and persecuted them zealously. Peter and Paul were both martyred during Nero's persecution, along with thousands of other Christians.

Why did the Spirit inspire Mark to put pen to paper (or quill to parchment) right then? Notice that Mark highlights the many times Jesus meets misunder-

standing, suspicion, opposition, rejection, and betrayal. Not only would Jesus understand his followers' suffering, he had suffered the same way. And he promises that suffering is not the last word. That would have been a word of comfort and hope for the persecuted Christians for whom this Gospel was written.

### 1 Andrew, apostle

What would you say if Jesus asked you "What are you looking for?" The texts for Andrew's feast are Ezekiel 3:16–21; Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 10:10–18; John 1:35–42. (Andrew's day is November 30, but this year the First Sunday of Advent, which takes precedence, falls on that date. And so we celebrate the saint today.)

### 3 Francis Xavier, missionary

In the spring of 1541, this Spanish missionary boarded a ship in Lisbon on his way to Asia. For the rest of his life, he traveled tirelessly, spreading the gospel in India, Southeast Asia, Japan, and the Philippines. He died on this date in 1552, just off the Chinese mainland.

### 6 Nicholas, bishop of Myra

Little is known for certain of this fourth-century bishop. He died on this date in 343, but lives on in legend and folklore. See [www.stnicholascenter.org](http://www.stnicholascenter.org) for much more about how the bishop became Santa Claus.

### 7 Second Sunday of Advent

We always hear from John the Baptist on the Second Sunday of Advent, calling us



to repent and prepare the way of the Lord. The texts appointed for today are Isaiah 40:1–11; Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13; 2 Peter 3:18–15a; and Mark 1:1–8.

### 13 Lucy, martyr

Not much is known about this young Sicilian who was martyred during the emperor Diocletian's persecution, perhaps in the year 304. But since her name means "light" and her day falls near the longest night of the year, her celebration became important in Sweden and Norway (where winter nights are especially long!).

### 14 Third Sunday of Advent

We hear from the book of the prophet Isaiah over and over in Advent and Christmas. The Gospels quote Isaiah more than any other text except the Psalms. The passages appointed for today are Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b–55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24; and John 1:6–8, 19–28.

### 20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church

This bold, intelligent, and competent woman died on this date in 1552. See page 36 for more.

### 21 Fourth Sunday of Advent

In today's first reading, the Lord tells King David that his house—his dynasty—is established forever. This

prophecy comforted the people through the centuries after the catastrophe of the Babylonian conquest. Somehow, someday, the king would come again—God promised it. In today's gospel, we find out how God's promise is fulfilled. Today's texts are 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16; Luke 1:46b–55 or Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26; Romans 16:25–27; Luke 1:26–38.

### 24 Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Eve

I can't hear tonight's texts without hearing Handel's *Messiah* in my mind's ear, can you? The Scripture passages appointed for Christmas Eve are Isaiah 9:2–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; and Luke 2:1–14 [15–20].

### 25 Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Day

Several of today's texts announce the coming of the Word of God among us in poetic (not narrative) form, reminding us yet again that God reveals truth in as many ways as we humans need to hear it. The texts suggested for Christmas Day are (set II) Isaiah 62:6–12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4–7; and Luke 2:[1–7] 8–20; and (set III) Isaiah 52:7–10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1–4 [5–12]; and John 1:1–14.

### 26 Stephen, deacon and martyr

Today's second reading tells the story of the first Christian mar-

tyr. If you have time, you might read the whole dramatic story (Acts 6:8–7:60). The texts appointed for the feast of Deacon Stephen are 2 Chronicles 24:17–22; Psalm 17:1–9, 15; Acts 6:8–7:2a, 51–60; Matthew 23:34–39.

### 27 John, apostle and evangelist

The apostle John was a fisherman, like his brother James and their father Zebedee. The opening of the Gospel attributed to him is a mystical hymn to Christ the Word of God and Light of the world. The texts appointed for John's feast are Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31; Psalm 116:12–19; 1 John 1:1–2:2; John 21:20–25.

### 28 First Sunday of Christmas

How does the prophet Anna respond to meeting the infant Christ there in the Temple? By praising God and spreading the Good News. We can do the same. Today's texts are Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4–7; Luke 2:22–40.

### 29 The Holy Innocents, martyrs

We ordinarily commemorate these martyred children of Bethlehem, victims of a tyrant's fear and rage, on the 28th, but the First Sunday of Christmas fell on that date this year. The texts appointed for the Holy Innocents are Jeremiah 31:15–17; Psalm 124, 1 Peter 4:12–19; Matthew 2:13–18.









by Stephen Martz

## IN YOUR DREAMS

King Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a magnificent “tree at the center of the earth.” It is “great and strong” and “from it all living things were fed.” Suddenly, a “holy watcher, coming down from heaven,” cries out: “Cut down the tree and chop off its branches, strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit” (Daniel 4).

Earlier in the Bible, Pharaoh dreams of seven “fat and sleek cows” emerging from the Nile only to be eaten by “seven other cows”

that “came up after them” and were “poor, very ugly, and thin” (Genesis 41).

If one of these dreams had been yours, would you know what to make of it? Neither of these ancient dreamers, great and accomplished though they were, could get a handle on his dream, and both turned to interpreters—Nebuchadnezzar to Daniel, Pharaoh to Joseph—to gain understanding.

Experiencing a connection between their inner and outer lives, our ancestors in faith tended to take their dreams seriously. As Western interest moved more to the outer world, the inner world was increasingly neglected and its preeminent

product, dreams, became “God’s forgotten language”—a phrase coined by the Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest, John Sanford. Only the poets, artists, and assorted mystics continued to speak the old language.

This is no longer the case. Dissatisfied with a faith based on intellect and doctrine alone, and seeking a more direct experience of God, many people today explore the mystical practices and traditions of Christianity and other religions. The inner life is back—and with it, a lively interest in dreams.

Although Daniel and Joseph were interpreting dreams long before there were psychoanalysts, it was the birth of psychoanalysis that especially sparked the comeback of the inner life.

The renewed interest began with Sigmund Freud, who in 1899 famously wrote that dreams were “the royal road to the unconscious.” His one-time disciple, Carl Jung, has been even more influential. With an approach to dreams broader and more religion-friendly than Freud’s, Jung has become a key resource for the spiritual renewal movement and spiritual directors. The interest in dreams, the unconscious, and the inner life may be livelier today than at any period since biblical times.

### Life-changing dreams

What about you? Do you take your dreams seriously? Should you? You bet! Just think. If Joseph of Nazareth or the three wise men had ignored their dreams, Jesus would have perished as a young child and Christianity would never have been born. Or if Pilate had attended to his wife’s dream and dismissed the charges against Jesus, imagine how startlingly different our theology would be. Dreams can change the world.

They can change our lives, too. A few years ago, a woman in my parish, “Mary,” told me of a dream she



had just had. In it, I had invited her and her husband to a seminary class I was teaching. Her husband was confused by the subject matter, but she smilingly declared, “I liked it.”

A recent convert to the Episcopal church, Mary had never seriously considered a call to ordained ministry. But when I noticed that one of the students in her dream’s seminary class was also named Mary, I suggested we talk more about the dream. As we did, Mary became aware of God’s call to her in a new and unexpected way, and she is now engaged in a formal discernment process that may lead to seminary and ordination.

What has been most important about her dream is not that it might lead her to seminary, but rather that it has led her to abundant life. Like most of us, Mary was going through life living primarily from her conscious mind, unaware that there was more to her than “I,” or what Jung called the “ego.”

The dream asked her to pay attention to something greater than “I.” This something wanted her to listen to its desires and to stop living by ego alone. This was difficult at first for Mary. She has a strong-willed ego, but she is learning, and so is her ego, how much richer life can be when we live with and from something greater than the ego.

What is that something? Jung calls it the Self, and identifies it with

the archetypal God image, what most Christians would understand as the *imago Dei* (image of God) dwelling within each person. He suggests that fullness of life comes when ego and Self—many Christians might translate these as will and *imago Dei*—are in right relationship. Our lives become disordered when one or the other becomes too dominant.

## The language of dreams

My favorite way to think about dreams is that they help us to stay in balance, frequently bringing to our attention those things that we overlook or dismiss. They help us remember what we tend to forget. Another helpful image, as a colleague puts it, is that dreams are X-rays of the soul. They tell us what’s going on inside.

Of course, not all of us are great at speaking foreign languages or reading X-rays. Sometimes the language of dreams—image and symbol—seems exotic and unfamiliar. Other times, reading those X-rays that are filled with strange images, obscure references, and nonsensical plots may seem daunting. But with patience, resolve, and a willingness to let go, most of us can learn to understand our dreams.

Keep in mind the idea of balance. A man dreamed he was in a kitchen searching for a bowl in which to mix light and dark liquids.

When I heard this dream, it gave me goose bumps. The dreamer, a highly accomplished professional, had responded to an abusive childhood by developing a one-sided perfectionism that minimized the darker, “bad” parts of his being, and the dream image signaled a willingness to begin blending the light and dark of his personality and personal history. That’s exciting, because as he does, his perfectionism will modulate, and he’ll be able to embrace his humanity and find greater happiness.

The mixing of light and dark requires a container, says the dream. I believe the container image refers to a new and stronger self, a soul or psyche able to hold together the light and dark of his very human being. All of us must learn to accept our strengths and flaws as part of a single personality, and so this dream speaks of both the dreamer’s personal challenge and a universal human task.

## Recovering a lost part

A woman recently reported a dream in which her schoolroom was overrun with rats, some living, most dead. It was a graphic image of darkness and disease, which reflected a conservative religious upbringing that had sought to squelch her creativity and sense of wonder. She has worked hard in analysis to free herself from the spell those religious



voices cast in her psyche—voices telling her that she is “bad” for wanting to follow her own path, and the dream showed that hard, often distasteful work. In it, as in life, she must patiently shovel the dead rats from her psyche while catching and setting free the live ones. Doing this task will allow her to remake her room—her psyche—into a warm, clean, personal space.

In a similar vein, dreams can sometimes be about recovering a lost part of ourselves, or repairing a severed relationship. Dreams often seek to connect or reconnect parts of ourselves. Another woman presented a detailed dream that included a child that was mummified or in a cocoon state. In response, she was to marry a young man and with him care for the child.

One technique I find helpful in interpreting dreams is to think of each figure or thing in a dream as a part of the dreamer’s psyche. Though not all dreams work this way, many do. If we think of this dream in that way, perhaps the dreamer’s task is to care for the child within her. To do so, the dream may be saying, she will need not only her “feminine” self, but also the help of “masculine” parts of her.

A man in his 50s whose alcoholic father died when he was a teen dreamed of an extended family gathering to honor his father. The father, spotting his son, crossed

the crowded room to tell him how proud he was of him. Some would interpret this dream as a kind of wish fulfillment in which the psyche of the dreamer, not getting what he longed for in life, concocted the image to make the dreamer feel better. Fair enough, but not far enough. For, as we’ve talked about that dream over several years, it has become clear that it was primarily about uniting two parts of the dreamer’s personality.

This raises a fascinating question: Where do dreams come from? Are they simply the product of the psyche, built from the stuff of the dreamer’s daily life and relationships, repressed desires and forgotten memories? Or are they in some sense transpersonal, coming to us from outside the boundaries of the individual human personality?

In my view it’s not a simple either/or. Some dreams certainly are the product of the individual unconscious. Others come to us from places we do not know, speaking of things and using a symbolic language to which we never have been exposed. Still others include both elements.

## Balance and wholeness

The most intriguing dreams usually are those that emerge from what Jung called the collective unconscious. To illustrate, let’s return to Mary’s dream. As it continued, she

noticed a second student named Diana and saw me, the teacher, with bandages covering my eyes.

Mary did not recognize the Diana of her dream as the Roman goddess of the hunt and the moon or link my bandaged eyes to the blind Greek prophet Tiresias, who has well-known encounters with Hera, Odysseus, and of course Oedipus. As Mary’s journey has continued, however, it has become apparent that she requires the energies Diana represents. Similarly, she has needed me to be Tiresias to her. She also, startlingly, had caught an unconscious glimpse of my soul, for Tiresias has been an important inner figure for me for more than 20 years.

All of this may seem a long way from Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh, but it’s really not. The human journey toward abundant life demands that we seek balance and wholeness, and our dreams can be an important part of this effort.

The dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh remind us of the human tendency to become one-sided. As prophetic dreams, they also reminded those dreamers—and now remind us—that what we do not attend to in our inner lives will make itself known in our outer lives. 🌿

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SUSIE SAYS,

# Fear Not!

## A REFLECTION ON CHRISTMAS GIFT GIVING

by Sue Edison-Swift

*It is a cold night in Advent . . . I fall asleep on the couch watching yet another version of Dickens' A Christmas Carol on TV, and wake up to find my mother sitting in the chair next to me.*

*"Cool!" I say out loud. I love it when my mom, who died in 1992, makes an appearance in my dreams. "Actually, it's too warm in here," notes Mom. "I see you're still not keeping the thermostat turned down." We exchange knowing looks.*

*"I'll get to the point," she goes on. "I'm here to reassure you about Christmas gifts. You're doing just fine." "Well, now I know I'm dreaming," I say, sitting up, "because you hated Christmas gift giving, and I never seem to get it right."*

*"I've learned a lot in heaven, and two of my new friends are Christmas gift experts. I asked them to visit you. Pat is the Angel of Christmas Presents Past and Fran is the Angel of Christmas Presents Future."*

*"What, no Angel of Christmas Presents Present?" I ask, pleased with myself. We exchange knowing looks. I feel Mom kiss me on the forehead and then she is gone.*



Photo: The author at age 3 with her mother, Norma Edison, and her first book of prayers.

## Christmas Presents Past

Pat sits next to me on the couch and opens a big photo album. She points to a picture of a glass candle bowl.

"Oh, that's my favorite Christmas gift of all time!" I exclaim. "I was 10 years old. The doll I got from Mom and Dad on Christmas Eve struck me as childish, although I kept that to myself. We drove to Grandma's for Christmas Day. I had low expectations for the gift I would receive there.

"Imagine my surprise, then, to open a box filled with tissue paper and lift out a blue glass bowl. Even though I was uncertain of its purpose, it was clearly an *objet d'art*. 'It's a candle bowl,' interpreted my aunt. 'You put flowers in the middle and candles around the outside or you can put a big candle in the middle and surround it with flowers.'

"'Wonder of wonders,' I remember thinking; Grandma must have seen the emerging almost-grownup inside me. Look, Pat, I keep the candle bowl on the bookshelf."

I have more stories of Christmas Day at Grandma's, but Pat wants to move on. She points to a picture that captures the chaos of Christmas morning at the Swifts', circa 1977.

"I didn't do so well with my first round of Christmas presents for Paul's family," I tell Pat of my experience with my in-laws. "I made, wrapped, and packed 80 popcorn balls as sort of an all-family present. It turns out that the *one* person who liked popcorn balls had braces on her teeth. I was determined to do better next year for the 21 Swifties on the list. I had two rules: (1) each gift must cost less than \$5, and (2) each gift must look like it cost more than \$5.

"Paul wasn't so thrilled with the gifts I brought home. 'Do you think Jani will ever *use* this?' he asked. 'Do you think Mame will *like* it?'"

"I curtly reminded him that *like* and *use* were not operational criteria. I dared Paul to do better, challenging him to secure his sister Marcy's gift.

"Paul came back from the mall with an embroidered gauze top. It was perfect. It was \$20! I told Paul to return the top and I took back gift-giving control."

I turn and look sheepishly at Pat. "I forgot that I ever had a spending limit for gifts. Once I started using credit cards I stopped sticking to a budget. Now, despite my best intentions, it seems that I always spend more than I should on gifts."

Pat finds a picture of my daughter, Annie, holding a giant candy cane. She's about three years old in the picture. This is one of my

favorite gift stories, "I was grocery shopping with Annie," I begin, "and Mrs. Nelson stopped to chat for a bit. She asked Annie, 'What do you want for Christmas?'"

"'A candy cane,' Annie sweetly replied.

"Mrs. Nelson tried again. 'What *else* would you like?'"

"Annie thought for a bit and answered, 'A present.'"

"'What *kind* of present?' Mrs. Nelson asked slowly, thinking that enunciation would help Annie understand the question.

"'A *wrapped* present,' replied Annie slowly, thinking that enunciation would help Mrs. Nelson understand the answer.

"A week later, Mrs. Nelson showed up at our door with a wrapped candy cane. The candy cane was actually too big to eat, so Annie happily re-wrapped it in a doll blanket and took it to live among her pink plastic ponies."

Pat points to a picture of Paul, teenage Annie, and me all dressed up and ready to leave for the Christmas Eve candlelight service. "Oh, this is fun. I don't remember why, but we ended up shopping for Christmas outfits on December 24. Even with the last-minute timing we were relaxed and happy. The stores in the mall were almost empty. The salesclerks were visibly cheered by our delight at finding outfits to wear out of the store." I pause to savor



the memory of that evening before switching stories.

"Paul usually shops for Christmas presents on December 22 or 23; he likes his presents *fresh*." Pat doesn't let on if she thinks this family joke is funny.

"Anyway, every now and then Paul comes home from his Christmas shopping, disappears to wrap his presents, and once his wrapping is finished, he begins advocating for immediate present opening. *'Let's get secular Christmas over with!'* he asserts. Interestingly, it is always Paul who proposes early opening and I am always the decider. Some years I allow early opening, and some years I deem it better to wait. Either way, we love Paul for his *open now* inclination."

I flip photo album pages to find current Swift and Edison family pictures and begin talking to myself as much as to Pat. "After 30-some years of Christmas gift-giving, I guess I *have* figured out a few things. Since I'm an impulse buyer, I give up malls and mega-stores for Advent. I've stopped giving presents to *everybody*, whether that means all the nieces and nephews, or all my friends, or everyone on my work team. I've stopped worrying about parity or even consistency. Some years there are folks in our lives who just need a little Christmas more than others. I've even stopped freaking out if someone

gives us a Christmas gift and we don't have a present for them.

"In 1977, I only required a gift to seem more expensive than it was; these days I expect a lot more. I expect the good gifts I give to *do* good, too. Gift donations are obvious good gifts, but a gift can be value-full because it's Fair Trade, or handmade, or eco-friendly, or even because it's locally sold.

"I'm expecting less of my Christmas giving, too. I've decided that it's almost impossible to give the equivalent of my candle bowl at Christmastime. So, these days, I tend to give a little something for Christmas, like a Lutheran World Relief Handcraft Project ornament, and look for opportunities to give just the right thing at just the right time, even if it isn't for Christmas."

Pat points to a picture of a little artificial Christmas tree. I'm not proud of this story. "One year soon after my father died, Mom casually mentioned that she didn't intend to put up a Christmas tree. Paul and I were horrified at the thought. Our solution was to bring her a little artificial tree as an early Christmas gift. We set it up and decorated it before she could say 'no, thank you.'

"Only now do I understand Mom's yearning to take a break from a Christmas tradition. At this point in my life, post-empty-nest and pre-grandchildren, I occasionally enjoy keeping our big artificial

tree packed away, along with its accompanying boxes of lights and ornaments. I realize that every now and then I need a *little* Christmas, and then our two-foot tree with one string of twinkly lights is just right.

"Last year, though, we had a special guest, Xiao, a young woman who is new to the country and new to Christmas. We had great fun doing up the tree and trimmings in a big way. As we set out our collection of crèches, we used the figures to tell Xiao the Christmas story. *Jesus, God-with-us*, now that's a gift worth sharing."

I feel Pat offer a blessing on my head, and then she is gone.

### *Christmas Presents Future*

I discover Fran, the Angel of Christmas Presents Future, sitting on the couch holding a TV remote control. We haven't been formally introduced, but who else could it be?

Fran begins surfing through the basic cable stations and stops at a call-in program. From the backdrop behind the host's desk, I deduce the program's title: *Susie Says, Fear Not!* I do a double-take; the host looks like me, if I were tall and thin.

The caller sounds like me, too, if I was tall and thin.

"Am I tall and thin in the future?" I ask Fran. We exchange knowing looks.

Susie and the callers share ideas about how they're working to make



Christmas gift-giving more meaningful and less stressful. They offer ideas and suggestions, confessions and challenges. Susie affirms the callers for reflecting on their Christmas gifts past, for considering how their gifts reflect their values, and even for being honest about their needs as givers and receivers of Christmas presents. "What about gift-giving brings you joy?" Susie asks one caller. She follows up by

asking, "What about your Christmas gift-giving practice keeps you from being joyful?" Susie ends the program by saying, "*Fear not! Jesus, God-with-us, is a gift worth sharing.*"

As she leaves, I feel Fran give my hand a reassuring squeeze.

I turn my attention back to the TV and realize that yet another version of *A Christmas Carol* is about to begin. I turn off the set. "God bless us, every one," I pray,

and head upstairs to bed. 🌿

**Sue Edison-Swift** serves as communication director for the ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.

To receive a package of helpful resources for value-full gift giving, including the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog, the LWR Handcraft Project catalog, and the latest edition of *Whose Birthday Is It, Anyway?*, send your mailing address to [hunger@elca.org](mailto:hunger@elca.org).



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It's November 30—Happy New Year! No, I'm not getting ahead of myself. The church calendar is just one example of how our Christian faith often puts us at odds with the secular world. The beginning of the church year doesn't fall on January 1, but rather on the First Sunday of Advent. In 2008 that means that November 30 is New Year's Day.





As a generalization, we spend the first half of the church year with lectionary texts about the life of Jesus. Roughly the second half of the year is spent with Gospel passages about Jesus' teachings and ministry.

The first three seasons of the church year—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—are all of a piece.

They tell the story of Christ's life from its foretelling, to the nativity, to the coming of the Magi, to Jesus' baptism. So this year try distancing yourself from contemporary culture's idea of Christmas—both when it occurs and how long it lasts. Take a step back, look at the whole church year, and celebrate these first three seasons as if they

were three verses of the same song. It's a beautiful tune sung in many different ways around the world.

### A BOARD GAME

This time of the year, many of us travel long distances to celebrate the season with family and friends. This theme of traveling far from home during the holidays is



hardly new. After all, Joseph and Mary were traveling to Bethlehem. Unknown to them, the Magi were traveling at the same time. It can even be imagined that God was traveling, breaking into our physical dimension of time and space through the Incarnation.

While it's more common to think of journeying through the season of Lent, it is a metaphor that works well during these seasons too. It can help keep us from the frantic rush toward an idealized Christmas Day that is certain to disappoint.

To make this journey more tangible it helps to have a map. I like the idea of a board game as a map of this journey, with Epiphany as "home." This is particularly good if you're traveling with children during Christmas, as even very young children understand the idea of "coming home." This map also makes it instantly apparent that Christmas does not begin the day after Halloween (as the stores would have us believe) and does not end with Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

## ADVENT

While most of the world is celebrating Christmas already, we are observing the season of Advent, four weeks of preparation and anticipation. We are waiting not only for our celebration of Christ's birth but also for his second coming.

The way Christians have observed Advent has changed over the centuries. In the early days Christians considered Advent a somber time of penitence and fasting, the way many believers observe the Lenten season now. Today Advent is characterized by themes of watchfulness, preparation, yearning, and expectation.

We retain the reflective nature of the Advent season, marked by simplicity of ritual and worship. The liturgical color is blue, the color of hope.

Some symbols, like the Advent wreath, are shared by Christians all over the world. Other traditions and symbols are unique to certain countries or cultures. All are intended to deepen our understanding of what it means to wait, even as we prepare for the coming of Christ.

### *Advent wreath*

The first Advent wreaths appeared in the Middle Ages, but the modern tradition began in 19th-century Germany as a way to answer the question of eager children: "Is it Christmas yet?" The circular Advent wreath symbolizes eternity, a time with no beginning and no end. It is often made from evergreens, also a symbol of eternity.

The wreath is decorated with four candles, symbolizing the four weeks of Advent. As each candle is lit on successive Sundays the wreath

becomes brighter, a reminder of Christ as the light of the world. Although traditions vary, often the first candle is blue and is called the candle of hope. On the second Sunday of Advent the blue candle of peace is lit. The candle for the Third Sunday of Advent is rose-colored, signifying joy. For the Fourth Sunday of Advent the candle is blue again and stands for love. Some people light a fifth white candle in the middle of the wreath on Christmas Day. This is called the Christ candle.

### *Advent calendar*

The Advent calendar also comes to us from Germany and is used as a way to mark time until Christmas arrives. Beginning on December 1, a small door is opened each day, revealing a surprise beneath. Usually these are pictures or symbols of the season, such as the donkey and the stable or angels.

Modern Advent calendars sometimes hide a piece of chocolate or other candy behind each door. There are even digital versions of the Advent calendar available on the Internet.

Opening the doors of the Advent calendar can become a lifelong memory and comfort for many people. Parents do need to impress upon their children, however, that Christmas *begins*, not ends, on December 25.



## Santa Lucia

Several countries, most notably in Scandinavia, observe Santa Lucia day on December 13 in honor of the martyred Sicilian saint. The oldest daughter of the family wears a crown of candles and a white gown with a red sash as she brings coffee and St. Lucia buns to her parents before dawn. Younger daughters and brothers follow behind wearing white robes and carrying single candles. The name *Lucia* means “light” and Santa Lucia is referred to as the Queen of Lights. That light may be the reason she became so popular in Scandinavia, where December nights are long and dark.

## Las Posadas

In Mexico, Christians reenact Mary and Joseph’s journey each night from December 16 through Christmas Eve. This is a community celebration with a different family acting as host each night, offering their home as *la posada*, the inn. At dusk people gather to walk through the neighborhood, singing carols. Children carrying a figure of the Christ child lead the way, followed by the adults and musicians. They stop at different homes and are repeatedly turned away. Finally they arrive at *la posada* for that evening where they are invited in. There is plenty of food and drink for everyone and sweets for the children. The evening culminates with the breaking of a

*piñata*. The biggest party is usually held on Christmas Eve, followed by midnight Mass.

## Nativity scenes

In 1223, St. Francis of Assisi created a living nativity scene with costumed characters and live animals as a way of teaching illiterate peasants the Christmas story. Local artisans were so taken with the spectacle that they started carving three-dimensional nativities, or *presepios* as they were called in Italy, and the beloved tradition of the nativity scene was born.

Today nativity scenes (also called *crèches*) are as varied as the countries in which the artists live. The stable may be made from a coconut shell in Haiti or banana leaves in Kenya. An igloo or a teepee may represent the stable for some artists in the United States. In South America, llamas may substitute for sheep.

The figures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus often take on the physical appearance of indigenous peoples. The changing face of the Christ child is a marvelous way of underscoring the fact that Jesus came to save the entire world. And because children everywhere understand the concept of babies and families, the nativity scene is an excellent way of passing down the Christmas story to the next generation. Thus the nativity scene today remains a

teaching tool not unlike the one St. Francis had envisioned.

## Santons

A unique form of the nativity scene is found in France, where homes display *crèches* with small clay figurines called *santons* or “little saints.” This tradition began in Provence during the French Revolution (1789–99). At that time the state closed all the churches and people missed seeing the nativity scenes at Christmas. Because it was forbidden to have nativity scenes in their homes, people created small figures that could be hidden quickly. These began with the traditional figures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph but soon grew to include representations of actual people in their community. Today *santons* such as a farmer with a basket of eggs, a woman with flowers, or a baker carrying fresh bread can all be found bringing their gifts to the Christ child.

Try looking at that nativity scene in your home or church and then close your eyes. Can you see your mail carrier, your next-door neighbor, and your local barista worshipping at the manger?

## CHRISTMAS

Christmas begins on December 25 and lasts through January 5—the 12 days of Christmas. The liturgical color for the Christmas season is white, symbolizing joy. Not so long



ago, families celebrated Christmas Day together by attending worship and enjoying a feast of traditional favorite foods. The remaining 11 days of Christmas were spent visiting the homes of extended family and friends.

Today we often treat Christmas Day as a deadline, counting down the shopping days until it arrives. Children learn that the ideal holiday culminates in a visit from Santa Claus and a bounty of gifts. Christmas music vanishes on December 26, as do the remaining 11 days of Christmas, while popular culture turns its attention to after-Christmas sales, New Year's Eve parties, and football.

How can we offer a faithful alternative to the world's idea of Christmas? Here are a few ideas:

Teach children *why* we give gifts at Christmas—out of gratitude for God's greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ. It's also part of our tradition because of the Magi's gifts to the Christ child.

Develop simple family traditions and rituals that are based on relationships and activities. For instance, you may help young children make a birthday cake to celebrate Jesus' birthday. Make memories with your family that will outlive any gift that money can buy.

Sing Christmas carols as a family. Because religious carols are no longer taught in public schools

and congregations don't sing them during Advent, many children are growing up knowing more about Frosty the Snowman than the Herald Angels.

Observe the full 12 days of Christmas as a family. Before Christmas day arrives, plan together 12 activities (going to a movie, sledding, a museum outing, and so on) that you'd enjoy doing together. Write each idea on a separate piece of paper and wrap them up or put them in a basket. Then pick one for each day of Christmas.

### EPIPHANY

On January 6 we arrive at the end of our game board map! And why is Epiphany "home"? Because this is where we Gentiles enter the story for the first time.

Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the Magi, also called the Three Kings or the Three Wise Men, the first non-Jews to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The meaning of the Greek word *epiphany* is "to make manifest," "to reveal," or "to show." God revealed Christ to the Magi as a sign that Jesus came for all people of all nations and all races. The liturgical color for January 6 remains white for our joy in the light of Christ. Green is the color for the season of Epiphany, symbolizing our growth in faith.

People in many Spanish-speaking countries call January 6 *El día*

*de los reyes* or the day of the kings. The traditional food is the *Rosca de Reyes*, a sweet bread decorated with candied fruit. Baked inside the bread is a plastic figurine of the Baby Jesus, hidden because it symbolizes the need to be protected from King Herod. The knife that cuts the bread stands for the danger Jesus faced. The person who gets the figurine in their slice is the host for a party on February 2. Similar customs gather around cakes in other cultures as well.

In Puerto Rico children put bowls of water and grass under their beds the night before Epiphany as treats for the Magi's camels. In other places, children put handfuls of hay in their shoes under their beds for the three kings' horses. And generous children find little presents left behind for them by the kings the next morning.

The Irish refer to Epiphany as "Little Christmas" and celebrate it much as we do Mother's Day. Men take on the household duties for the day and children give gifts to their mothers.

Try celebrating some of the traditions of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany this year. They will help you and your family learn from—and enjoy—a journey through these seasons. Safe travels! 🌿

Susan Greeley is the producer and director of *Grace Matters*, the radio ministry of the ELCA, ([www.gracematters.org](http://www.gracematters.org)).





LET US PRAY

## Be and Be Loved

by Debra K. Farrington

“How does it feel to be unemployed?” an acquaintance asked me shortly after I left my job to write and lead retreats full-time. “I’m not unemployed,” I thought angrily, “I’m self-employed.” But my anger told me something about my own insecurity in leaving the workforce. I was no longer a bookstore manager or publisher, titles that came with a certain amount of respect, not to mention a regular paycheck. On top of that I’d just gotten married and become a step-parent (my first effort at parenting) one month shy of my 50th birthday. Who I was and where I was going felt very much up for grabs.

As I struggled through the first months of my strange new life, with its unfamiliar schedule and smaller income, I kept reminding myself that I was a child of God. Intellectually I understood that this was all I ever was or would be, a beloved child of God, and that should be more than enough for me. But it took me at least six months to wrap my heart around that identity. I missed the trappings of my former positions. Some days I still miss them. But I know in my heart that being one of God’s beloved children is the most important thing I’ll ever be, and that it is good.

So many things in this world divert us from truly resting in the glory of being one of God’s beloved children. The busy-ness of our days, all the unnecessary things we buy, the perks and respect that come with titles and paychecks, and so much more. Your experiences may be different from mine, but you too may

find that the definitions of identity that come from the culture around us are easier to claim than the one that came through our baptism: child of God. Those other identities are so alluring that it is only when we walk away from them or when they’re torn away from us that we come face to face with who and whose we truly are.

I’m not saying that the identities we carry around with us are bad. Being a farmer, daughter, teacher, mother, manager, wife, doctor, grandmother, clerical worker, or anything else can be wonderful. Many times these roles are God-given. But there is something deeper, something that persists even when we lose one of the identities we hold dear. As spirituality writer Wendy Wright asks: “To what extent do we ‘know’ ourselves first as civic and church leaders, or as respectable citizens or conscientious parents or homeowners or degree holders or job holders and not at all as beloved daughters and sons of God? We are beloved not because of what we do. We are beloved because we are” (“Passing Angels: The Arts of Spiritual Discernment,” in *Weavings*, November/December 1995).

So the best question when I left the paid workforce wasn’t, “How does it feel to be unemployed?” The better question would have been: “How does it feel to be?” How does it feel to you to simply be and to know that you are loved? 🌿

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# THE PERFECT HOLIDAY

It's the holiday season. How are you feeling about your spending? Even more important, how are you feeling about your holiday?

What holiday are we celebrating, anyway?

It's pretty clear to most of us Christians that we now have two holidays happening at this time of year. First there is the commercial holiday, with lights and gifts and parties. And then there is the religious holiday, with lights and gifts and gatherings. It could be seen as a small difference, but the attitude is worlds apart.

Maybe in your grumpier moments, it feels like the commercial holiday has overtaken the religious one. But you know, turnabout's fair play. Our Christian forebears claimed the winter solstice for Christmas, or what they thought was the winter solstice. They wanted to reinterpret this important day as the day that marked Jesus' birth—to make it more explicitly Christian. For a while, it was January 6 (which remains Epiphany), and then it was moved to December 25, where it has stayed.

But these days, it's the reverse, and the religious commemoration is being outshone by Santa. The holiday displays come out earlier every year, it seems, and we feel the pressure to "have a great holiday," which usually means getting to the right parties, having a wonderful time with family, singing favorite Christmas carols (often during Advent, since the commercial holiday is over sometime in the afternoon of the 25th), and giving or receiving gifts that are just right. None of these things are bad, of course, but the pressure to "put on" Christmas grows every year.

That's the most unfortunate thing about the commercial side. It has become something *we* have to plan, produce, and acquire. It's all quite ironic, since the

whole point of the religious side of things is that God simply comes to us.

## God's work, our hands

We human beings are not so easily contented with passive receiving; we tend to take matters into our own hands and start strategizing. If we don't have much power, we may lapse into victimhood, blaming others for our woes or putting on a martyr's airs. If we do have power, our pride may take over, and we become control freaks. None of the options are attractive or healthy. This "taking matters into our own hands" is what Martin Luther called original sin—we do not trust God to be God. In our unbelief, we do not wait for or receive God's blessing.

Instead, we are easily swayed by the sparkle and glitz, the noise and the bustle, the perceived demands. They distract us from the truth that all our efforts will not produce a lasting happiness or security or whatever it is we are striving for. Finally, the notion that all we love is temporal, that we are mortal . . . finally, these truths are terrifying.

Finally, in spite of our desire to be our own creators, the truth is that we are in God's hands. There and only there, are we finally free to be who we have been made to be. There we can freely give in service to the neighbor. There, and only there, we find our primary purpose and joy.

How shall we, who seek to honor Jesus' birth, live within this consumer culture? How do we care for ourselves and those we love in the midst of the cultural celebration and still be open in faith to the deep truth of this season—that God comes to you and to me freely, as a gift of deepest love, without demand or condition?



During whatever is left in this season, your calling and mine is to plant ourselves squarely in the truth our faith offers us. Before Christmas, our job is to wait, to yearn for the hope of a Savior with all our hearts. Heaven knows our world is in trouble. There is so much saving that needs to be done. What might you do? Where do you have both gift and passion? There are so many ways to be God's hands.

Are you passionate about the environment? What gesture of hope will you offer to the earth in this season?

Are you one who yearns for the well-being of children around the world? What future-enhancing gift will you give to the children of the world in this season?

Are you one for whom home is both sanctuary and mission outpost? How will you share "home" in this season? Will a homeless one know more about home because of you in this season?

### God's love, our gift

Secondly, how will you, child of God, give yourself space and time to wait? Yes, we have spoken of doing, but how will you receive? Might you find a simple discipline to repeat in honor of the birth to come? Perhaps lighting a candle daily to remember the light that shines in the darkness? Perhaps a daily smell of evergreen to remember the eternal promise of God's love? Perhaps an Advent hymn to start your day, or five short minutes to reread the texts you heard in worship on Sunday, to wonder about the miracle we recall and the mystery of the end times?

And what might you *not* do in order to honor these days as a person of faith? How might you make it easier to wait? Shop less? Demand less of yourself and those you love? Save some of the celebrating for the Christmas season, which does not end on Christmas Day?

Millennia ago, Christmas came without our efforts. Mary waited, womb full of child. Like all women who give birth, she had to give herself over to her body, to let it do its work of bringing forth the life it had har-

bored for so long. Joseph waited too. The shepherds waited. The Magi waited. The angels waited. The world, though it did not know it, waited. In time, the baby came. And in that baby, God came.

When you think of it this way, every baptism is Christmas happening. Every time you go to the table for bread and wine, Christmas comes to you. Every time two or three gather in faith, it's Christmas once again. Because the promise of Christmas is not that *we* do it perfectly, but that *God* does.

### God's presence, our hope

We have the whole year to celebrate God's gift to us at Christmas. God's presence is true every day of the year, and someday, it will be our eternal joy. So what we produce in this season—our plans, our cookies, our gifts—are all fine and well, but the greatest gift of this season is that none of it need be done in order to make Christmas happen.

What difference might that truth make to you? Can you give yourself the gift of time to think about it? We might begin to recover from "affluenza" or overspending. We might begin to live more open to receiving God's gift of love and acceptance. We might find ourselves rich with forgiveness for our own shortcomings and the shortcomings of others. And we might find a well of compassion for the world God so loves.

Every time we are able to live as if Christmas were true, Christmas becomes incarnate a little bit more. Every time we fail to, we can look to the cross and then the empty tomb, and remember what lies ahead for that baby, as well as for us. Death, yes. But also new life, hope, and promise.

So this holiday is no small thing. In faith, there is plenty to outshine Santa, outlast Santa, and out-hope Santa. It's a miracle, a lavish gift, and it's ours. 🌿

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## Daniel: Keeping the Faith

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel



### BIBLE STUDY

#### Theme Verse

##### Daniel 2:20

Daniel's praise of God

"Blessed be the name of God from age to age,  
for wisdom and power are God's."

#### Opening

Hymn "We Praise You, O God" (*Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship* 870, *Lutheran Book of Worship* 241)

#### Prayer

We praise you, God, our creator and redeemer.  
We praise you for the beauty of the world  
and for your guidance and protection  
during times of trouble.

We give thanks for all the faithful saints  
who have come before us  
and for those who gather here today.

Through your Holy Spirit,  
open our hearts and minds  
to hear your word and your will  
for our lives, our community, and our world.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

#### Overview of the Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is unusual. It was originally written not in one language, Hebrew, but in two, Hebrew and Aramaic. By the time of Jesus, most people in Judea and Galilee spoke Aramaic.

The book of Daniel contains two types of literature. The first six chapters, which we will explore in this study, contain stories of dream interpretations and faithfulness under persecution. The second six chapters are apocalyptic literature, with terrifying visions of the future. In Daniel 1–6, Daniel interprets the king's dreams and visions. In Daniel 7–12, Daniel receives visions that he needs to have interpreted for him.

The two different types of stories in Daniel 1–6 (dream interpretation and faithfulness under persecution) follow set patterns. In the dream interpretation stories, the king has a dream or vision. His wise men are unable to interpret it. Daniel interprets the dream because God reveals it to him. In the persecution stories, envious officials set a trap so that Daniel and his friends must decide between obeying the king or obeying God. They obey God and are persecuted for their faith. God delivers them and the king acknowledges God's power and majesty.

Into these stories are interwoven our three themes of *hesed*, heroic actions, and hiddenness. Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach (*SHAD-rack*), Meshach (*MEE-*



back), and Abednego (*uh-BED-neg-oh*), demonstrate *hesed*, loving loyalty, in being faithful to God and God's commandments. This *hesed* will lead to heroic actions of disobedience to human laws that challenge God's laws. Hiddenness has a twofold theme in the book of Daniel. God reveals hidden mysteries to Daniel and God's power in the world is also hidden. The stories of Daniel suggest that appearances can be deceiving. Human rulers appear to have the power of life and death over us, yet, it is actually God who controls our lives and our world.

## Before We Start

### Supplemental Background Information

The book of Daniel is set during the time of the Babylonian Exile, yet the story addresses issues that were important after that time. Recall that Babylon had conquered the kingdom of Judah in 597 BC, and after years of rebellion, destroyed the Temple in 586 BC, destroyed the monarchy, and carried off almost all the surviving Jews to Babylon, where they remained. This is the Babylonian Exile or Babylonian Captivity. Eventually, Persia overthrew the Babylonian Empire and freed the captives in about 537 BC. Some returned to their native land, as the book of Ezra records, but many others settled elsewhere, forming major Jewish communities all around the Mediterranean world.

Scholars call this experience the diaspora (*dy-ASP-uh-rah*) or dispersion. Diaspora Jews living as members of a minority in foreign countries faced the questions of how to practice their faith and maintain their identity as people of God. People wondered how much to adapt or adjust to another nation's customs. Was there a danger of being absorbed into the larger culture and losing their identity? How can a faithful person resist the dominant culture when it threatens her faith?

The stories in Daniel 1–6 explore such questions and suggest that people can remain faithful to God in a foreign land. We can live under a foreign power

and even find success serving it. Yet we must not fall into idolatry, give up prayer or the worship of God, or violate God's laws. If human laws contradict God's teaching or will, we must disobey them.

It is likely that Daniel 1–6 was written after the Babylonian Exile, during the diaspora, to help people understand how to live as God's chosen people even outside the promised land.

## Setting the Stage: Daniel and his Friends at the Babylonian Court

**READ DANIEL 1:1–7.** The setting is King Nebuchadnezzar's court during the early years of the Babylonian Exile. According to Daniel 1:2, God is the one who allows King Nebuchadnezzar (*NEB-uh-ked-NEZ-er*) to have power over the conquered nation. It is clear that King Nebuchadnezzar does not understand this yet. Most likely, he believes that his gods have given him the victory. In the ancient world, a war between nations was also a war between their gods. People would interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's act of placing God's temple vessels in the treasury of his gods (1:2) as a sign that the Babylonian gods were stronger than the LORD. King Nebuchadnezzar's act also demonstrates his power over the exiles.

1. What changes were to be made in the lives of the royal and noble young men?

The Babylonian Empire was an imperial colonial power. One way that colonial powers enforce their will upon colonized peoples is to co-opt the best and the brightest among them into serving the imperial power. King Nebuchadnezzar takes the wisest young men among the Israelite nobility, trains them for three years, and gives them the best food and new names.

As we saw in the book of Ruth, names in ancient Israel have meanings. The name Daniel means "God is my judge," Hananiah means "Yahweh has acted

graciously,” Azariah means “Yahweh has helped,” and Mishael probably means “Who is God?” or “What is God?” It is not clear what their Babylonian names mean, although Abednego most likely means “servant of Nabu,” a Babylonian god. What is clear is that the Hebrew names that lift up faith in God are changed to reflect the interests of the Babylonians. These young men are given Babylonian names and the king’s food, and are taught the Babylonian language and customs, all so that they may serve the Babylonian king. Their identity as Jews is undermined as the king tries to make them over into Babylonians. God’s presence and power seem hidden. (See “St. Nobody” on p. 6.)

2. *How do you think these young men felt as they experienced these things?*

### Gentle Resistance to Assimilation

**READ DANIEL 1:8–17.** Daniel is in no position to completely rebel. In fact, he may not have wanted to. The story of Daniel is reminiscent of the story of Joseph and Pharaoh in Genesis 40–41. Joseph, at first a slave, eventually comes to prominence in Egypt through his power to interpret dreams. Joseph serves Pharaoh and through this service saves many people and lands from a seven-year famine. Throughout all this time in Egypt, he remains loyal to God. So too, Daniel is a blessing to King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon.

These stories suggest to diaspora Jews that one can remain faithful to God while serving foreigners and foreign nations. They also suggest to foreign leaders that God will bless them and their countries through the Jews in their lands, if these leaders allow them to practice their faith in their own way.

Daniel and his friends are willing to serve the Babylonian king, yet set limits when this service challenges their religious practices. One area where limits are set is diet. Daniel does not want to defile himself by eating the king’s food, which would not be prepared accord-

ing to the Jewish dietary laws. The Hebrew word translated here as *defile* has a strong sense of desecration and a concern with blood. Daniel’s refusal to eat the king’s food is an example of his *hesed* to God.

The Hebrew Bible contains several commandments about the types of food that Jews can and cannot eat (see Leviticus 11 for some examples). These laws do not forbid any vegetables, so Daniel’s request ensures that his diet is in accordance with the law.

It is not clear why the biblical laws prohibit certain foods. The observation of these food laws set Jews apart and help give them a sense of group identity.

Food laws, keeping the Sabbath, and circumcision became important practices that helped diaspora Jews maintain their identity in a foreign land. While they might take up some of the customs of their adopted land, as long as they maintained these practices they maintained their identity and were never completely absorbed into a different culture. Observant Jews still maintain these practices, 2,500 years after Daniel’s diaspora experience.

3. *Are there practices that set Christians apart from non-Christians? If yes, what are they? If not, why do you think that is? In some countries, Christians are persecuted. Are there religious practices that you would not give up, even if threatened with persecution? If yes, what are they? If not, why?*

Daniel cannot change his diet on his own. He needs the help of the palace master and the guard, whose own lives are forfeit if Daniel’s changed diet causes him to fall behind the other young men (1:10). Daniel is also asking them in a small way to undermine the king’s authority over the young exiles. No wonder they are reluctant to take responsibility!

“Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master” (1:9). Daniel 1:



suggests that God is at work in a hidden way to help Daniel. The word for favor here is *hesed*. This *hesed* allows Daniel to adapt the demands of the Babylonian court to the requirements of his faith. The palace master does not demand that Daniel assimilate totally to the Babylonian culture. Moreover, like the Moabite Ruth, the foreign palace master is a hero who acts for others at risk to himself.

At the end of the test, Daniel and his friends are “better and fatter” than all the others (1:15). God also gives Daniel and his friends knowledge and skill in literature and wisdom, outshining all the Babylonian experts (1:17, 20). This passage shows that faithfulness to God’s law has good results that benefit both the Jews and the Babylonians.

### Digging Deeper

The idea that “if you obey God, you will be blessed; if you disobey God, you will be cursed” is a powerful explanation for when both good and bad things happen to us. It is a simple, easily understood theological claim that also has biblical support.

Read Deuteronomy 11:26–28. Blessings and curses are tied to obedience to God’s commandments. Deuteronomy 28 gives a list of the blessings and curses people can expect. John 9 also shows us this understanding of God blessing and cursing us in the New Testament. The disciples see a man born blind and ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

4. *God rewards Daniel and his friends for their faithfulness. Are there times when you have been faithful and have been rewarded by God? Or times when you felt that God was punishing you for your sins? Why is this understanding of obedience leading to blessing and disobedience leading to cursedness so powerful in our lives and world today?*

This understanding of how God works is still in circulation today. Therefore, we may hear that AIDS or lung cancer is God’s judgment on certain people for things they have done. Some people claim that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were God’s judgment upon America for any number of sins. Yet other texts in the Hebrew Bible challenge this understanding. The book of Job shows us a man who is blameless, upright, fears God, and turns away from evil (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). Yet he endures unimaginable suffering for no reason at all. The idea of “obey God and be blessed” does not always work. It is not a universal explanation for suffering and we should not assume that suffering people deserve what they are going through. Whatever the causes of suffering, it is important to remember that God is always with us in our suffering and that Jesus suffered on the cross to gain victory over sin, death, and evil.

### King Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream

If it were not for the possible death of every wise counselor (Daniel 2:12–13), the beginning of Daniel 2 could be quite humorous. The king’s spirit is troubled by a dream (2:1; the same language is used of Pharaoh in Genesis 41:8). He calls *every* possible wise man to interpret the dream for him. When the wise men ask for the dream, the king demands that they tell him both the dream and its interpretation. It seems the king is suspicious of their abilities and has decided to put them to the test. If they cannot give both answers, they will all be torn limb from limb (2:5). The wise men respond that the king’s request is impossible. “The thing that the king is asking is too difficult, and no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals” (2:11). While these wise men acknowledge that only the gods can do this, strikingly, they do not turn to the gods for help.

Daniel is not present at this meeting. Facing the king’s executioner, Daniel learns of the matter and asks

the king for time (2:16) and he will give the king what he wants.

## Receiving God's Wisdom

READ DANIEL 2:17–24.

5. *Daniel and his three friends pray to God, not just for their own safety, but also for the lives of all the wise men. Daniel receives a vision from God of both the dream and its interpretation. He immediately blesses and praises God, both for who God is and for what God does. Using Daniel 2:20–23, fill out the following table, listing reasons for praising God.*

God's attributes or qualities
God's actions with nature
God's actions with human beings
God's actions with Daniel

6. *What words and themes are repeated? What does this text say about God's wisdom and human wisdom? About God's power and human power? About God and hidden things? Can you think of other biblical texts or stories with similar themes?*

Daniel makes it clear that God knows everything. He also proclaims that while God's power often seems hidden, it is stronger than human institutions and rulers. Nebuchadnezzar's power is the violence to kill

those who displease him. Yet even Nebuchadnezzar's power is limited; it is God who sets up and deposes kings. This is something King Nebuchadnezzar needs to learn. When Daniel is brought before the king, he makes it clear that it is only God's gracious revelation to him that allows him to interpret the king's dream (See "In Your Dreams," p. 14.)

## The Interpretation of the Dream

READ DANIEL 2:36–45. King Nebuchadnezzar has dreamed of a huge statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay. Ultimately, a stone not cut by human hands destroys it (2:31–35). Daniel announces that this dream is about four human kingdoms, beginning with Babylon and ending with a fifth kingdom—God's everlasting kingdom.

Many have tried to determine the identity of these four kingdoms, some as a way of figuring out the end times. Interesting as that exercise may be, that is not the purpose of the dream in this text. First, the dream and its interpretation show that Daniel has received special wisdom from God. Second, while it places King Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold, it highlights the limited and temporary nature of human kingdoms and power. In the end, only God's rule and power last forever. Third, it is good news to faithful Jews suffering under foreign rule or persecution that God controls the future and assures the future.

The interpretation of the statue begins with precious metals—the gold head representing Nebuchadnezzar. The metals representing the reigns after his are arranged in diminishing value, suggesting that the past is the "good old days" and better than the present and future. Iron, while not a precious metal, was valued for its strength and use in weaponry. Here it suggests either a temporary improvement or a movement to a different value system, where strength and power are more important than wealth. Either way, the feet of iron and



lay are unstable and unlikely to hold the weight of the entire statue.

This dream presents a view of time and history that both resonates with and challenges us. On the one hand, there are times we look to the past of our society, community, and congregations as the golden “good old days” to which we would like to return. On the other hand, we sometimes view the future and progress as moving us into better times, feeling that science and technology will eventually solve the problems we face.

**7. Reflect upon your community or congregation.**

*In what ways has the past been the good old days? In what ways is the present better than the past? What are the hopes and challenges for the future? How does the assurance that the future is under God's control provide comfort and hope?*

The stone not cut by human hands, which crushes all these kingdoms, has several different interpretations. Some see it as coming from Mount Zion, upon which the Temple was built (Isaiah 2:2). The stone then represents the people of Israel. Christians have seen the stone as a symbol of Christ or the church. No matter how one interprets the stone's identity, it demonstrates God's power over the destructive powers of the world. It also works beyond human ability and understanding, in hidden ways, to bring about God's reign of peace and wholeness.

## The Beginning of the Education of King Nebuchadnezzar

**READ DANIEL 2:46–49.** King Nebuchadnezzar begins to understand the awesome power and wisdom of God. He praises God as a revealer of mysteries and Lord of kings (Daniel 2:47). Yet he does not fully understand who God is, for he proclaims God as the best of many and then falls down and worships Daniel! Acknowledg-

ing God's wisdom, King Nebuchadnezzar then shows his own power by lavishing honors upon Daniel and his friends. But it will not be until Daniel 4:34–37 that King Nebuchadnezzar truly understands the power and majesty of God.

Both Daniel and the king praise God. Praising God is an important part of our calling as Christians. Yet sometimes our lives and prayers focus on intercessory requests for others and ourselves and our praise of God is limited.

Consider starting a praise journal during the next month. Some may wish to sketch their praises of God or create new songs of praise. Write down reasons for praising and thanking God and incorporate these praises into your prayers. These reasons may include who God is and what God has done for you, for other people, and for the created world. Imagine how you can share this praise with others.

## Looking Ahead

In our next lesson, we will see heroic faithfulness in the midst of persecution and the results of a dream that demonstrates God's ultimate power over King Nebuchadnezzar.

## Closing

The poetic nature of praise uses images to expand our understandings and open our minds to new possibilities. You might add expansive language to the Doxology.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise God, all creatures here below,

Praise God, above ye heavenly host,

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen. 🌿

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# Katherine, *morning star*

by Joy A. Schroeder

The reformer Martin Luther wrote to his spouse with affectionate humor: "To my dear lady of the house, Katherine von Bora Luther, a preacher, beer brewer, gardener." She worried about her husband when he was away. She looked forward to his letters, wondering what he would write next. Sometimes he addressed her as "Lord Katie" or "my dear lady of the New Pig Market." (There was a hog market near Katherine's garden.) Recalling the story of Adam and Eve, he often called Katherine "my rib." He and Katherine once sent greetings to another married couple and their children: "I and my rib greet you and your rib—and all the little ribs."

Though some pious biographies characterized her as a docile housewife keeping busy with her embroidery as she ran the parsonage, Katherine von Bora (1499–1552) was in reality a strong, assertive businesswoman. She managed an enormous household, a farm, and a small brewery. Her home, a former monastery, was a boardinghouse for university students and guests. Refugees from religious persecution could find shelter there. It was

a hospital in times of plague. Katherine always deferred to Martin publicly, addressing him respectfully as *Herr Doktor* (Sir Doctor), but it is clear that she was the manager of the household. Many men thought Katherine was too outspoken, but she was a good match for her strong-minded husband. Like Martin, she remained true to her convictions, even when the world had different expectations.

## *The convent and her escape*

Born into a knightly family, Katherine was only five years old when her family sent her to a convent boarding school. Her mother had just died and her father had married a widow who brought children of her own into the household. Boarding school was one way to deal with stepchildren, but young Katherine might have wound up in the convent even if her father had not remarried. Her family was noble, but not wealthy. It was easier for them to pay a small dowry to the convent than to come up with a large marriage dowry. Like many girls at that time, Katherine probably did not have a choice about her future.



At the age of 16, Katherine took vows to become a nun at the Cistercian convent in the German town of Nimbschen. The Cistercians are a strict order devoted to silence and contemplation. Wearing white robes and black veils, Katherine and the 40 or so other nuns gathered in their chapel to chant prayers eight times a day. She learned Latin and probably performed tasks such as gardening and needlework. It may have been in the convent that she learned to brew the beer that her husband would later praise so much.

In the early 1520s, Katherine and some of the other nuns heard about Martin Luther. His book, *On Vows*, was small enough to be smuggled into a convent and easily hidden in the nuns' wide sleeves. Luther said that monastic vows, especially when taken by teenage monks and nuns, were not binding for life. Luther believed that the impulse to marry and have children was implanted by God at the beginning of creation. God said, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Luther believed that very few people were truly called to a life of celibacy, and that it was wicked for the church to impose rules forbidding nuns, monks, and priests from fulfilling God's command. Luther's ideas made sense to Katherine.

Twelve nuns from Nimbschen sent word to Luther, saying they wanted to escape. (Unless they had



special permission, nuns were forbidden from leaving convent life.) The thick convent walls and doors that protected the nuns from the outside world also kept them locked in. Luther arranged for a pious man to smuggle the women out: Leonard Koppe, who ran a delivery company that brought herring and dried fish to the convent kitchen.

The mission was dangerous. Abducting a nun—even with her consent—was a crime punishable by death. A nun was considered to be Christ's spouse, and people were sure that God would be angry if anyone stole Jesus' brides from the convent. Even though nothing improper took place, there would still be a taint of sexual scandal attached to the nuns and Koppe, their "abductor." The city of Wittenberg, where Martin Luther lived, was ruled by Frederick the Wise, the Saxon prince who protected Luther and permitted his reforms. Katherine's convent, however, was located in the portion of Saxony ruled by Duke George, who was loyal to the Roman church. Duke George would punish Koppe if he were caught. The nuns would be sent back to the convent, where they would probably be beaten and closely guarded so they could never leave again.

It was the night of Holy Saturday, 1523. As the rest of the convent was exhausted from Lenten fasting

and distracted by preparations for the next day's Easter celebration, 12 nuns escaped. We don't know the details, but somehow they slipped out of the convent, hiding in Koppe's covered wagon. Some stories say the nuns escaped in herring barrels, but the earliest account says they hid under a tarp *as though* they were barrels. In any case, on Easter morning, their wagon crossed the border into Prince Frederick's territory, where they were safe and free.

### *A new life*

Two days later, Koppe's cart rolled into Wittenberg. What do you do with a wagonload of runaway nuns? One townspeople said: "A cartload of vestal virgins has come to town. May God give them husbands!" The women were then housed with reputable married couples. Most were soon married. Luther was interested in one of the nuns, Ave von Schönfeld, but she married a doctor. Another former nun ran a girls' school. Two years later, Katherine's future was not yet settled. She was 26. (Most German women at that time married in their twenties, so she was not yet considered too old.) Katherine fell in love with a handsome, wealthy man, Jerome Baumgartner. He apparently returned her affection, but his family disapproved of him marrying a penniless ex-nun. When Luther suggested a certain older man

who was known to be miserly and unpleasant, Katherine flatly refused. She said she would marry Luther himself or his friend Nicholas von Amsdorf. Both men were confirmed bachelors, so she may have been bluffing. Luther, now age 41, had wanted to avoid marriage because he was considered an outlaw and heretic. He could be killed if he fell into the wrong hands. He did not want to put a wife and children into this situation. But for several years his friends had urged him to marry. Luther agreed to wed Katherine. He said his marriage would irritate the pope, cause angels to rejoice and make demons weep.

They married in June 1525. Martin says that on the morning after their wedding, he was startled to see pigtails on the pillow next to him. Most of Wittenberg rejoiced in the marriage, but some were scandalized. Opponents said that Martin and Katherine were motivated by lust rather than faithfulness to God. An anti-Lutheran pamphlet slandered Katherine as a shameless "fallen woman," who had betrayed her marriage vows to Christ, and threatened her with the torment of hell. As an ex-nun marrying a former monk, Katherine had defied centuries of tradition.

### *Running a household*

Once married, Katherine faced new challenges. How would she feel



and clothe a family on her husband's modest academic salary? After the marriage, Prince Frederick gave Luther the building that had belonged to Luther's own religious order, the Augustinians. This Black Cloister, named for the black robes the monks had worn, was a large structure, with enough room for 40 monks. It would have made sense for Martin to sell the Black Cloister and use the money to purchase a more suitable home; however, Katherine persuaded Martin to keep it. They lived there and she rented rooms to students.

She bought additional land for gardens and for pasture for cows, sheep, pigs, and goats. She purchased a farm that had once been her own family's property. She also operated a small brewery, and everyone praised her beer. (Its excellence may have been helped by water quality. Katherine persuaded the town council to forbid anyone from urinating in the river or dumping garbage into it on Tuesdays and Thursdays when she drew water for the beer.)

Katherine was extremely practical—something that her husband was not! Much to Katherine's chagrin, Luther was always giving away the family money. Katherine faced criticism from people who thought she should be less interested in running her farm and other property. Other challenges included her husband's

frequent depressions and ill health. Katherine gave birth to six children. Elizabeth died as an infant. Another daughter, Magdalena, died at age 13. Her other children, who outlived her, were Hans, Martin, Paul, and Margareta. Katherine also raised her orphaned nieces and nephews. She nearly died from a miscarriage when she was 41.

Martin told many stories about Katherine. One time, after he had translated Scripture into German, he promised her 50 gold pieces (one-sixth of his yearly salary) if she read the Bible cover to cover. She took on this challenge and her husband paid! Her husband called her "the morning star of Wittenberg" because she rose at 4 a.m. to begin her work.

### *Widowhood and worries*

When Martin died in 1546, Katherine was grief-stricken. Writing to her sister-in-law, Katherine despondently signed her letter, "Luther's widow, who has been left all alone." After Martin's death, Katherine faced serious challenges. As the widow of the reformer, Katherine was at particular risk for mistreatment by enemy soldiers during the religious wars, and twice she had to flee from invading soldiers. A 16th-century German woman was legally a minor, needing a guardian to make financial decisions. Although ordinarily a widow did not inherit her husband's property,

Luther left his estate to Katherine, knowing that she would act in their children's best interests. Court officials upheld Luther's will, but only after a long legal struggle.

In 1552, plague broke out in Wittenberg, and she left town as quickly as she could. But outside the town of Torgau, the horses pulling her wagon bolted. Trying to gain control of the panicked horses, Katherine fell into a ditch filled with cold water. Katherine never recovered from her injuries and died several months later. She was buried with honor in the Torgau city church.

Katherine von Bora Luther would probably be forgotten by history had she not been married to a famous man. However, her own personality makes her extraordinary. She made a bold escape from the convent because her conscience did not allow her to stay. In a time when few opportunities were open to women, she chose her own spouse and was a talented business manager. She should be remembered not only as Luther's "rib," but as a remarkable woman in her own right. 🌿

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GRACE NOTES

## Radical Welcome

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



### Once my husband and

I were invited to dinner at the home of a colleague and his wife. They lived in a spacious older house in an affluent suburb. After drinks were served, our hostess said, "Come and help yourselves," and we trooped into the dining room. There on the table was one pan of lasagna. A container of store-bought coleslaw was set on one side of the lasagna and a matching container of potato salad was arranged on the other side. The three dishes might have fed a family of six, but there were at least 20 guests. My husband and I couldn't believe it. How would we all eat? So all the guests helped themselves to a small spoonful of lasagna and just a dollop of the salads.

The next week we found ourselves at a dinner given by an immigrant community of Christians. Many of these people, new to the United States, had low-paying jobs. The tables in that church hall nearly sagged under the bounty of food: a large circular tray overflowing with a savory rice dish, a huge bowl of hummus surrounded by dozens of pita loaves, and more. The food was plentiful and the conversation rich.

Money was not a problem for my colleague who served the small pan of lasagna, yet the hospitality displayed at his dinner party seemed stingy and spare. The conversations that evening were miserly too—most talk remained focused on people's work. At the second party, however, where the new immigrants had few worldly possessions, tray after tray of food was presented for their

guests. Laughter rang out as stories about families and friends flowed as freely as the food.

At both dinners, the hosts intended to be hospitable, but the one at the immigrant church felt far more welcoming.

What are your experiences of hospitality? As Women of the ELCA we are about to embark on a study of hospitality, and you will have a chance to grow in your own understanding and practice of hospitality. Through this study we seek to ensure that our gatherings—fellowship, Bible studies, book discussions, retreats—offer a hospitable community for all women in the church. We hope to grow in hospitality to be truly welcoming, offering each woman a place at the table.

You are invited to read *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* by Stephanie Spellers. Join in our churchwide discussion of this book by participating at any time, January through May, on our Radical Welcome blog or our Web board. You can also participate in a live Internet chat on second Tuesdays, January through May. Go to [www.womenoftheelca.org/hospitality](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/hospitality) to learn more.

Perhaps you will want to facilitate a local discussion, either at the same time as the churchwide discussion or at some other time. You might make the book the focus of a day-long or weekend-long retreat for your congregational unit.

May God richly transform and bless us through this exciting study. 🌿

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## Trust, Risk, Love

by Catherine Malotky

## Who am I, God? I live

in the middle of your creation, not as you, the Creator; but of you, a co-creator. I am among the ways you shape this world. Your way is both hidden and clear to me, so I live in the middle. To you, the one who called me forth both to life and to service, I commit my path.

And who are you, God? How might I honor you, who called me into being? Shall I claim what I can know and insist that your will must be preserved in purity as it has been passed down to me? Shall I be so modest in my role as co-creator? Or shall I trust your wisdom's ongoing revelation, and trust my past and future to your evolving possibilities? Shall I lean into my co-creation and dare to imagine new ways for new times?

Shall I surround myself with like-minded souls who long to know you and be true? There is safety in that. We can confirm for each other what we believe and know. But that may not stretch our understanding. Living in the middle, not venturing to the edge, is sure and safe. We do not risk your scorn, and we do not risk getting it wrong. But when life changes around us, is doing it the way we always have still safe? Is what was once faithful, as faithful as it might be for a new day?

These are mysteries, God. Your mysteries. I most want to be open to you, open to see and hear and embrace who you are in this time and place. I want to hear your call, to be your hands, to honor your gifts to me, bountiful and graced. Would I, dear God, have seen

your incarnation in the manger? Could I even have imagined that the Creator of the whole universe would take on my limited human form, constrained by time and space? Could I have believed in those early days, that your love would be willing to give up so much, to enter in so completely?

*Living in the middle, not venturing to the edge, is sure and safe. We do not risk scorn, and we do not risk getting it wrong.*

I confess I am not sure. Would I have stood with the religious authorities and clung to the verity of the past? Would I have been able to see the Messiah in this baby?

Now your presence in that child is long confessed by my forebears in faith. It is no longer a completely new way to imagine you. But this radical interruption, this stunning expression of your Godness must, if I am to learn from it, be a sign that you will never be finished becoming what we need.

This much I know. You love me without restriction. Open me, then, to your revelation in my time. Call me out of my comfort zone that I might give testimony to the wonder of a God who wants nothing more than to love the whole creation. Each of us. All of it. Teach me to trust in your vision, which can see so much more than I. Trust, risk love. I am yours. Amen. 🌸

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been a editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



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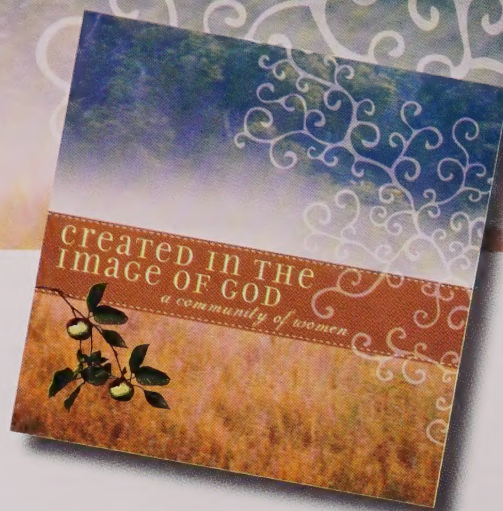
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